An Air Line of Communications for Armor

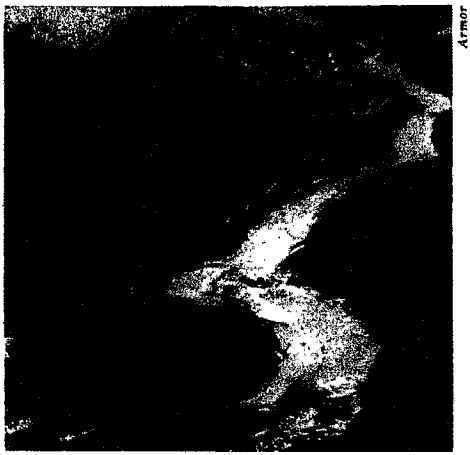
Brigadier General J. McKinley Gibson,
United States Army-Retired

IN THE summer and fall campaigns of 1862, General "Jeb" Stuart, the great Confederate cavalry commander, made a series of raids deep into enemy territory. On at least two occasions, he marched his force entirely around General McClellan and his Army of the Potomac. During these Civil War exploits, the Confederate commander made no attempt to maintain a land line of communication. His troops lived off the land, and they resupplied themselves with captured Union military stores. The history books tell us how devastating these operations were to the morale and well-being of the Union Army and how much General Lee, commanding the Army of Northern Virginia, relied upon them to keep his stronger foe off balance and on the defensive.

Not since the Civil War has a major military force operating in relatively open country against a well-armed enemy been able to duplicate these feats. Down through the years, military formations have become larger, heavier and much more complex. As a result, in all the wars since the 1860s, armies have become more, not less, dependent upon a protected land line of communications. But now, over 100 years later, this need no longer be true.

In March and April of 1969, an American armored task force operated on the Khe Sanh Plateau in the northeastern corner of the Republic of Vietnam for a prolonged period of time without the benefit of a land line of communication. In fact, the commander of this operation deliberately planned that there be no main supply route or land link to this task force.

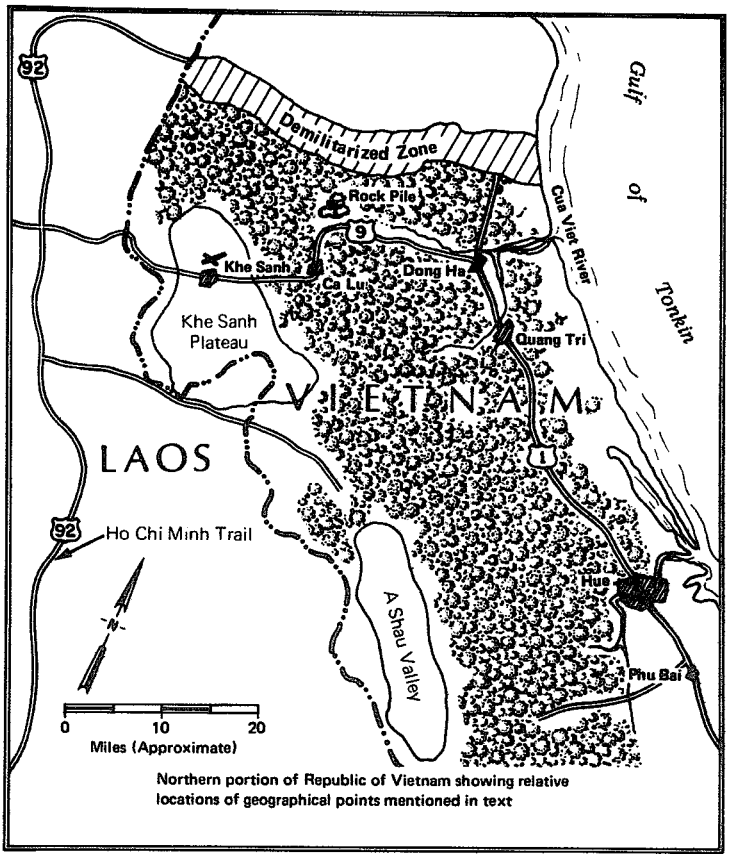
In March 1969, intelligence reports flowing into the headquarters of the 24th US Corps, located at Phu Bai near Hue in Vietnam, indicated that the North Vietnamese once again were moving across the Lao border in the direction of



the A Shau Valley. Air reconnaissance had disclosed that the North Vietnamese were constructing a road from old Route 92 on the Ho Chi Minh Trail across the lower end of the Khe Sanh Plateau in the direction of the A Shau Valley. Long-range patrols inserted into this area were reporting the sound of trucks and other traffic moving over this road.

As a consequence, the 3d US Marine Division was directed to employ a force to interdict this new route and to search out any North Vietnam base areas which might have been established in the northern extension of the A Shau Valley. The Marine division commander decided to commit one regiment for this purpose. Also, as an extension to this operation, he and the 24th US Corps commander decided to employ an Army armored task force along the Lao border on the Khe Sanh Plateau to protect the flank and rear of the Marine regiment. The operation was given the code name Malin Craig.

The armored task force consisted of elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th US Infantry Division (Mechanized), an Army mechanized brigade that had been serving, since its arrival in Vietnam in the summer of 1968, under the operational control of the 3d US Marine Division. This armored force was given the code name Task Force Remagen. It consisted of two, and later three, mechanized infantry companies, a tank company, two self-propelled artillery batteries—one 105mm and one 155mm battery—a reinforced armored engineer platoon and a battalion headquarters element. Included in the latter was an organic scout platoon, a 4.2mm mortar platoon, a maintenance platoon and a battalion supply section. At the height of the operation, there were about 150 tracked vehicles in the task force. No wheeled vehicles were used.



Northern portion of Republic of Vietnam showing relative locations of geographical points mentioned in text

In this far northern part of the Republic of Vietnam, there is only one road worthy of the name connecting the Khe Sanh Plateau with the populated areas along the coast. It is called Route 9 and, in French colonial days, was the main road between Quang Tri City on the seacoast and Savannakhet on the Mekong River in Laos. In March 1969, the last secure American position on Route 9 was at a bend in the road some 20 miles inland from the coast. In better times, there had been a small Montagnard village called Ca Lu at this bend in the road. From Ca Lu, the road wound upward through a deep valley for about 20 miles until it reached a high plateau. The ruins of the ancient town of Khe Sanh sat

astride a stream in the middle of this plateau. The Khe Sanh airstrip lay about a mile north of the ruins.

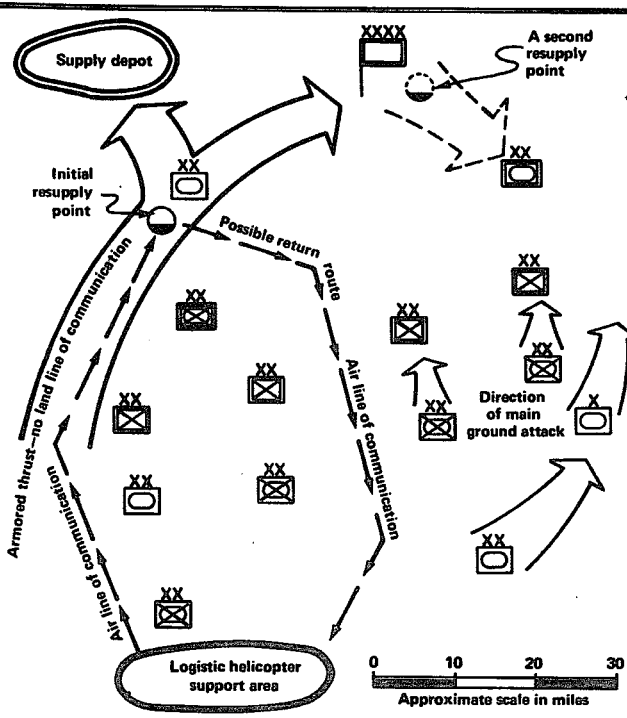
There were several narrow defiles and one unfordable mountain stream along the road from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh. The enemy could easily interdict this stretch of rugged and difficult terrain. It would require several battalions to secure it—battalions that were not available. Therefore, it was decided that no effort would be made to keep this road open behind the task force. An armored bridge launcher would be employed to span the unfordable stream. After passage of the last vehicle in the armored column, the span would be retrieved and the road would again be impassable. With no land line of communication, plans had to be made to supply Task Force Remagen by air throughout the entire operation.

The after-action reports of the brigade state that Task Force Remagen successfully made the passage over Route 9 to the Khe Sanh Plateau and then ranged up and down the border for 47 days. It cut the new road being built into the A Shau Valley, it defeated several slashing attacks by elements of two North Vietnamese regiments, and it took a heavy toll of the enemy. During this time, the task force consumed over 56,000 meals, 59,000 gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel, 10,000 rounds of artillery ammunition and tons of other supplies.

The maintenance sections of the task force replaced 12 engines, 18 sets of tracks, seven transmission assemblies and did numerous other on-the-spot maintenance jobs. All supplies and replacement equipment were brought to the task force by Army CH47 or Marine CH46 helicopters. These helicopters were operating from bases from 20 to 40 miles away from the task force. It was a tremendous logistic feat representing about 15 supply helicopter sorties every day for 47 days. For the first time in history, an armored task force was successfully supplied by helicopters for a prolonged period of time and under combat conditions.

Much has been said and written about the use of the helicopter in offensive operations. While there is disagreement about the degree in which this vehicle in its present form can be employed in a mid or high-intensity war, all students of the military art seem to agree that it has added a new dimension to the battlefield. It has already carved out a role for itself in such fundamental functions as reconnaissance, command and control, air assault, troop transport and antitank defense. Much research and development effort has been, and is now, going into the employment of the helicopter in these roles. Recent maneuvers in Germany and the United States have stressed the use of the helicopter in performing these functions. However, its employment in logistics has not been fully exploited.

The US Army has tended to take for granted the helicopter as a logistical vehicle. The assumption is that there is nothing very difficult about this role. This attitude is shared by other armies, or so it appears at this writing. Yet, the proper application of the helicopter in the logistical role offers the pos-



A general concept for the employment of logistic helicopters in support of armor operating without a hard line of communication

sibility of a major tactical innovation. Here, we are not talking about individual helicopters serving in a resupply role, or small numbers of them performing administrative or routine supply runs around the battle area. We are suggesting their use en masse to sustain offensive operations of major formations—particularly heavy armored formations.

The means for such employment are at hand. The Army's CH47 Chinook and UH1 Huey helicopters have the basic capabilities required for this task. Also, the UTTAS (utility tactical transport aircraft system) soon to be available—with its greater speed, range and reliability—will add greatly to this capability. The immediate problem is not one of hardware, but of the development of doctrine.

Concurrently with the articulation of a sound doctrine for the employment of the helicopter in this much expanded logistical role can come a better appreciation of the types of vehicles that will be required in the future.

First, we need to know more about the number of sorties per day that are required to supply completely by air an armor battalion, a mechanized brigade and an armored division engaged in prolonged offensive combat. Can an air line of communication (ALOC) be established for these formations? Can large numbers of helicopters operate over them at night and in periods of reduced visibility? Is it feasible to operate heavy helicopters along the ALOCs in the nap of the earth mode? What kind of pathfinder equipment and other navigational aids will be required? How will this mission affect the organization of the helicopter units involved? What modifications must be made in the organization and equipment of armored and mechanized units so that air-delivered materiel will be efficiently received and used? What impact will all this have on the entire logistical system of the command?

And, of course, the obvious question—that of vulnerability: what kind of survival rates can be expected for helicopters employed in this manner? These and many other questions can only begin to be answered after exhaustive troop unit tests are conducted using current aircraft and equipment.

While the combat developments community can contribute to a solution to these problems, the greatest initial strides can be made by troop commanders interested in realistic training. Using local training areas, exercises should be conducted that would require the complete dependence of a battalion-sized formation on aerial resupply. The scenario should require the employment of

the unit in an offensive role. The armor or mechanized battalion should move frequently both day and night. Absolutely no ground resupply or administrative support should be permitted. Initially, an exercise of this type should last at least two weeks. Later, the time should be lengthened to periods of more than 30 days. After much more is known about the complete aerial support of armor or mechanized infantry battalions, these training exercises should be expanded to include larger formations.

In time, the joint aspects of such operations, and, in particular, the role of the US Air Force in them, should be considered. Major joint exercises, such as the recently concluded FTX Gallant Hand, should include operations of this type in their scenarios. The goal should be the complete support by air of an armored division conducting offensive operations for a period of more than 30 days.

If a commander on a future battlefield could call upon highly mobile armored formations capable of operating independently and free from a land line of communications, he could employ them far to the enemy rear—in the manner of Jeb Stuart's cavalry. He could use them to tie down major enemy reserves, to cut vital enemy lines of communication, to seize key terrain, overrun enemy headquarters and supply depots, gather vital intelligence and disrupt enemy plans. Such a weapons system at the disposal of a future field commander would give him a marked advantage over his foe, perhaps a decisive one. This coupling of the helicopter with armor in a thoroughly integrated and carefully worked out logistical role might conceivably influence the outcome of a future campaign to the same degree that the German use of the blitzkrieg —the integration of air and armor—did in the summer of 1940.

The helicopter made its debut on the battlefield toward the end of the Korean War. It saw much wider use during the recent war in Southeast Asia. But we are still tinkering with the bits and pieces of it. Which military power will tie this new dimension in tactics to the whole? It is possible that the use of helicopters to supply independent forces could constitute a major development in military tactics representing a real breakthrough.

Brigadier General J. McKinley Gibson, US Army-Retired, is a former Deputy Commandant of the USACGSC. He has an M.A. in International Affairs from George Washington University and is a graduate of the Army War College. He served with the 83d Infantry Division during World War II, with the 1st Cavalry Division in Korea, and with the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Vietnam. General Gibson retired from the Army in July 1973.